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Navy Medicine at Pearl Harbor (Dec. 7, 1941)

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(NO COMMENTS)

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Naval Hospital Pear Harbor (BUMED archives)

Dec. 7, 1941 still represents the U.S. Navy's greatest disaster. In just over two hours, much of the [Pacific Fleet](#) had been destroyed or seriously damaged. Even before the last Japanese aircraft had disappeared over the horizon, the pride of the U.S. fleet—seven battleships that once projected U.S. might and prestige—either lay on the bottom or was too crippled to be of any immediate use. Bombs, torpedoes, and machine guns had taken a terrible toll, with the Navy alone losing 2,008 men.

Navy Medicine was represented at Pearl Harbor by a naval hospital, a partially assembled mobile hospital, and the USS *Solace* (AH-5), the Navy's newest hospital ship at the time. Heroic efforts to save lives by the men and women who manned these facilities began

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minutes after the first Japanese bomb fell and never waned until the last casualty was tended to.

Below we offer answers to some commons questions about the Navy Medical Department’s activities at Pearl Harbor on that day that still lives on in infamy.

How large was the Navy Medical Department at the time of the attack?

Navy Medicine comprised of 511 dentists, 195 Hospital Corps Officers, 10,547 hospital corpsmen, 524 nurses, 1,957 physicians. The Bureau of Medicine (BUMED) consisted of 75 officers, 32 enlisted and 225 civilians.

What medical facilities did the Navy have on Pearl Harbor?

-Naval Hospital Pearl Harbor - This 250-bed hospital was one of the best equipped and staffed of the 21 Navy hospitals in operation in 1941.1 Due to the concentration of naval personnel in Hawaii, additional medical support was provided by USS *Solace*(AH-5) which lay anchor off “Battleship Row” at Ford Island and a mobile hospital (#2) which was under construction at the time of the attack.

Naval Hospital Pearl Harbor was slightly damaged during the attack by crashing enemy plane. 2 In order to make room for the expected flow of casualties, ambulatory patients were evacuated from the wards to vacant buildings and five tents set up behind the hospital. The hospital received its first patients at 0900. Within the first three hours, the hospital received 546 casualties and 313 dead. At the end of Dec. 7th, the hospital reached a patient census of 960 casualties. Medical effort at hospital was supported by officers and corpsmen from damaged battleships, two surgeons from Mobile Hospital # 2, and a hospital patient—a convalescing Navy physician recovering from a major surgery. To support nursing care, 114 additional nurses were supplied through the Red Cross.



-USS Solace (AH-5) -The USS Solace was one of two Navy hospitals ships in operation during 1941.3 The hospital ship received its first patients at 0825. The ship discharged 141 patients to duty in order to make room for casualties. On December 7th, 132 patients were admitted aboard the ship (over 70 percent of casualties were burn cases.)

-USS Argonne (AG-31) – The USS Argonne was berthed in the first repair slip at the north end of the “1010” dock in Pearl Harbor. After the attack, ship

medical personnel set up a “clearing station” on the dock to take care of men evacuated from ships or rescued from the water. At 1030, medical personnel set up a “field hospital” at Officers’ Club located on Navy Yard.

-Mobile Hospital # 2 – Despite being under construction at the time of attack, personnel attached to the facility were able to improvise a makeshift facility and assist in the care of 110 casualties.

What were the final casualty totals?

The attack left 2,403 military personnel and civilians dead, including 26 hospital corpsmen,

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January 2012 (13)
December 2011 (13)
November 2011 (20)
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September 2011 (12)
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two Navy dentists, and two Navy physicians. The loss of life was no greater than aboard the battleship *USS Arizona*. Forty-nine percent of those killed in the attack (1,177) were crewmembers of this ship. This included one medical corps officer, one dentist, and 15 hospital corpsmen. The battleship *Oklahoma* lost 429 crewmembers in the attack (including one dentist and five hospital corpsmen).

Naval Hospital Pearl Harbor lost one staff member during the attack—a hospital corpsman (PhM1c Arthur Russett) was killed while on liberty.



Burned and injured patients receive care aboard *USS Solace* (AH-5) following the Pearl Harbor attack on 7 December 1941. BUMED photo # 09-5043-31 from the BUMED Library and Archives.

What were the leading causes of casualties?

Burns, compound fractures, flesh wounds (gunshots, shell, and shrapnel), penetrating abdominal wounds. Sixty percent of all casualties at Pearl Harbor were burn cases caused by burning fuel oil and/or flash burns. Most burns were extensive (up to 80 percent), and mainly first and second degree. Nineteen neuropsychiatric (shell shock) cases were reported at Naval Hospital Pearl Harbor.

Where were the dead buried?All deceased personnel were sent to Naval Hospital Pearl Harbor for identification and burial. Basement of old hospital laboratory and vacant nurse quarters

were used as temporary morgues. Hospital pathologists, a Navy dentist, and a hospital corps officer oversaw identification of the dead and preparation for burials. The first burials began Dec. 8th in the Oahu Cemetery. A new cemetery was established in the Red Hill area of Halawa (Halawa Cemetery) for the overflow of dead.

How many Navy Medical personnel were honored for their actions?

Two Navy physicians and two corpsmen were awarded [the Navy Cross](#) for their actions during the attack. One Navy dentist posthumously received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal (Lt. Cmdr. Hugh Alexander, *USS Oklahoma*). Commendation ribbons were awarded to three Navy dentists, two hospital corps officers, 45 hospital corpsmen, one nurse, and 27 physicians.

Footnotes:

(1) Naval Medical Hospitals in 1941:

CONUS: Annapolis, MD, Bremerton, WA, Brooklyn, NY, Charleston, SC, Chelsea, MA, Corpus Christi, TX, Great Lakes, IL, Jacksonville, FL, Mare Island, CA, Newport, RI, Parris Island, SC, Pensacola, FL, Philadelphia, PA, Portsmouth, VA, Portsmouth, NH, Quantico, VA, San Diego, CA, Washington, DC. OCONUS: Cañacao, the Philippines (until 10 December 1941), Pearl Harbor (Territory of Hawaii) and Mobile Hospital # 1 in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Largest Navy Hospitals in December 1941: San Diego, CA (1,360 beds), Portsmouth, VA (1,199 beds), Mare Island, CA (676 beds), and Philadelphia, PA (643 beds).

(2) Laboratory building and animal lab damaged and vacant Chief Petty Officer quarters were destroyed by a crashing Japanese plane.

(3) *Solace* was commissioned on 29 July 1941. The other hospital ship in commission at the time was USS *Relief* (AH-1)

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